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ABSTRACT

A classroom technique designed for developing German second language vocabulary is expanded on for additional classroom functions and activities. The method uses a bag containing a variety of objects. The objects are drawn out of the bag and discussed in class. The contents of the bag should be unpredictable and unusual, and they should be changed frequently as the students' vocabulary increases. In addition, the items in the bag should reflect as much morphological diversity as possible. A sample collection of toy animals is used to illustrate how the bag's contents can be instrumental in teaching a variety of grammatical points in German. For example, toy animals may be used to demonstrate gender, and clusters of similar-gender animals can illustrate different plural forms. Each student can be given an animal at the beginning of class for practice in expressing ownership and attributes. The objects can enliven grammar points by allowing students to focus on something concrete rather than the standard fictions and marginally credible characters of textbooks. Additional uses for the objects in more traditional drills and exercises are also noted. (MSE)

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# WHAT'S IN THE BAG (AND WHY?) TANGIBILIA FOR THE CLASSROOM

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In their book Teaching German: A Practical Guide, Wilga Rivers, K. M. Dell'Orto, and V. J. Dell'Orto point to a method of imparting a basis corpus of vocabulary which involves "discussing objects in the classroom (...) in a realistic setting," a practice they refer to as "object centered."[1] This method begins with common classroom items such as books, windows, tables, etc., and moves on to an equally accessible classroom item, namely students. As a variant, they suggest that the teacher "use the contents of a handbag or shopping basket instead of classroom objects." Later on, attention shifts to pictorial representations of things unavailable in the normal classroom, such as "houses, gardens, airports, farms."

As far as it goes, the authors' description gives a positive assessment of the method. With a bit of imagination, however, the "object centered"--or "shopping bag"--method can be endlessly expanded to provide not merely a store of common vocabulary, but a basis for student assimilation of more advanced morphological and syntactic features. In what follows, I will provide some ideas for collecting and utilizing a set of objects which can serve as linguistic reference points in the classroom.

First, a shopping bag need not merely contain everyday shopping or "classroom" items which, according to Rivers/Dell'Orto/Dell'Orto, limit students to "accurate production of very trite sentences which they would not conceivably wish to use in spontaneous conversation."[2] In fact, contrary to traditional object-oriented practice, the objects may transcend the bounds of group categories such as "everyday student objects" or "realia in the target language." Novelty stores and children's toyboxes will produce a panoply of low-priced (and in the case of the toyboxes, often free) items which lend themselves admirably to classroom use. The contents of the bag should under no circumstances be predictable; in fact, the odder the collection of objects the greater will be the student interest they generate. (The bag itself, incidentally, should sport a large legend in the target language, and the word for "bag" should be introduced early on.)

Second, the vocabulary supplied from the bag should never remain static; it should change along with the grammatical knowledge of the students. The concept of **die Karte** in German can, in the course of introducing compounds in the first semester, become **die Landkarte, die Speisekarte,** or **die Fahrkarte** with the appropriate objects held up or circulated for display. In

this context, **realia** play a major role; one can begin with familar American objects (a McDonald's container), move on to similar objects imprinted in the target language (a **Viertel-Pfünder mit Käse** container), and finally produce completely alien objects of cultural importance (a ready-mix package of **Knödel** or a **Schmalzlerflasche**).

Third, especially in languages with complicated morphological systems (e.g., genders, differing declensional patterns, and case paradigms) the contents should reflect as much **morphological** diversity as possible. A bag for a Latin class would contain examples from all five declensions plus major sub-groupings, e.g., first declension masculines and various third declension root types; a Russian bag would contain examples of the three genders as well as plenty of masculine animate/inanimate and shifted stress/non-shifted stress contrasts.

Bearing in mind these three principles, let us turn to a sample collection of objects which will cover a variety of grammatical points in German.

Every collection should have as its core a group of similar objects which correspond to a major syntactic feature in the target language, in our example, gender. This allows the students a basic set of morphological reference points with which one can compare later additions, e.g., by explaining that **die Liebe** is a bisyllabic feminine in **-e** just like **die Schlange**. My own bag contains several rubber toy animals, one for each gender in German: a shark (**der Haifisch**) nicknamed "Bruce" or "Jascha Haifisch" according to the cultural horizon of the class; a mouse (**die Maus**); a porcupine (**das Stachelschwein**); and, to cover weak masculine nouns, a lion and a bear (**der Löwe und der Bär**). One might just as easily form a core with vehicles (**der Zug, die Straßenbahn, das Auto**) or place settings (**der Löffel, die Gabel, das Messer**). It is always good to have duplicates of every item in order to drill plurals when the time comes.

Once the students have mastered the concept of gender and can identify the objects in the nominative (i.e., **Das ist der/ein Haifisch**), it is time to introduce clusters of objects of the same gender: for masculine, a glove, a hat, a **Bierdeckel**, a pen, a styrofoam arm from a jewelry display; for feminine, a snake, a cup, a fork, a newspaper; for neuter, a book, a rubber band, a <u>piece</u> of chalk, a knife (for contrasting **das Messer/der Messer**, one might add a gauge of any type). These items, when presented in pairs, also cover all the common plural types in German, thus serving as an initial learning experience and later as reinforcement.

At this point, we have merely improved a bit on the traditional "object centered" canon. The next step demands from both student and instructor a great deal of imagination and ironic detachment: The class will now play with the objects.

How one approaches waving unusual and often comical items at a group of students depends on the instructor's personality and rapport with the students. From personal experience, I predict that the students will impart to the objects the degree of earnestness with which one deals with the grammar. If it is made clear from the onset that the objects represent an entertaining means to a serious end, one on which they will in fact be graded, most students will treat the introduction of a rubber shark into the classroom with interest (at best) or irony (at worst).

At the beginning of class, each student receives one object (by instructor's fiat or by student's request). Possessive adjectives then come into play as we determine individual or joint ownership (**Ist das Ihre/eure Maus? Nein, das ist seine/unsre Maus!**) . Because my particular collection tends distinctly toward the feral, I use the pattern verb **fressen** to introduce the accusative case. The student with the shark announces that the shark is hungry (**Mein Haifisch hat Hunger**) and proceeds to eat all the other objects as their owners cry out in protest (**Der Haifisch frißt die/meine Tasse! usw.** ). When the dative is on the agenda, students transact exchanges of objects with dative personal pronouns (**He du, gib mir dein Stachelschwein!**) or arrange birthday presents for the animals (**Was schenkst du der Schlange zum Geburtstag?**). In the adjective ending chapter, the objects take on surprising characteristics (**der weiße Hai, die südamerikanische Fledermaus, das liebe Stachelschwein**) which must remain with them throughout a repetition of all the previous exercises (**Was schenkst du der grünen Schlange zum Geburtstag?**)

With some imagination, the objects can enliven any grammar point by allowing students to focus on something concrete rather than the standard fictions of textbook usage which often involve marginally credible characters discussing topics of which the students have no experience. By forcing the students to describe or to seek (in a TPR setting) or to barter for tangible objects, one provides them with a real world context and a set of verifiable features to which they relate their language experience. "That is the white shark over there" seems, at least at the introductory level, preferable to the purely imaginary "That is the **Tübinger Stiftskirche** over there."

This method is, unfortunately, vulnerable to the charge that it generates absurdities, non-cultural contexts, and "very trite sentences which they [sc. the students] would not conceivably wish to use in spontaneous conversation." This is undeniably so, and for this reason the method should only be used--frequently in the first year of instruction, more sparingly for second-year grammar review--as a tool for the introduction and drilling of grammar points, i.e., as a springboard to a usage of the syntax with more complicated semantic items. The student who has completely assimilated the dative by showing a mouse to a shark will be able to transfer the pattern

quickly to showing suitcases to the customs offical and will be ready for the larger leap into the metaphor of showing someone the ropes.

Furthermore, the objects can play a major role in more traditional methods. The book mentioned above gives a number of drill types, all of which lend themselves to the "concretization" provided by the objects, e.g., chain drills (**Wohnt dein Haifisch in Hamburg? --Nein, er wohnt in Bremen. Wohnt deine Maus in Bremen? usw.**) and, at a higher level, with the invention of stories involving the objects (**Eines Tages ging der Haifisch durch den Wald ...**).[3] Used with wit and imagination, the "object centered" method provides an easy and concrete access to both morphological (gender, plurals) and syntactic features of the target language. The best objects are easily portable and easily available and should form a familiar and accessible reference point for the students when introducing new grammatical information to them. A bag full of everyday and not-so-everyday objects serves as an entertaining, yet pedagogically valuable tool in helping students assimilate unfamiliar grammatical categories.

## Notes

[1] Wilga M. Rivers, Kathleen Mitchell Dell'Orto, and Vincent J. Dell'Orto, Teaching German: A Practical Guide 2nd. ed. (Lincolnwood, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1988) 15-16.

[2] Rivers et al. 16.

[3] Rivers et al. 110ff.